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ABSTRACT

Graduate school is a game for which students need to know the rules and in which students must be willing to play. It marks the end of undergraduate study and the beginning of entrance into a society of the elite. Some of the problems students usually encounter in graduate school are limited social life, adjustment to work loads, disparity between formal and experiential knowledge, and constant worry about job opportunities after graduation. The problems are often lessened in smaller universities because faculty members in speech departments are usually willing to listen and are easily accessible to students. Though this may not be true of larger universities, students should take advantage of whatever assistance they are given. (SW)

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CONTENTS

Editorial.....2

Bitter Roots and Sweet Fruit: Notes on Elementary Speech Communication Instruction
by Dr. Matthew C. Morrison.....4

The Use of Speech Activities in Upper Elementary and Lower Secondary English Classes
by Steven Ring.....11

A Speech Minor Looks at the Past
by Tory Raichlen.....15

On Graduate Research and Study
by Elissa De Barone.....19

The High School Forensic Program: Resource for School and Community
by Maridell Fryar and Charles N. Wise.....26

Balance in the Community College Forensic Program
by Dr. Dan Pyle Millar.....41

CS 500 824

ON GRADUATE RESEARCH AND STUDY

by

Elissa De Barone

Much has been written about the various aspects of graduate study. Though the articles are well-defined and clear and the authors articulate, their view is solely that of an observer. Due to that limited function, this article is written as a means of adding participation to the role of critic. Therefore, the sacred objectivity which most of the academia seek is thereby supplemented. As a graduate student at the University of Georgia I feel I can lay claim to be both a participant/observer in the field of graduate studies and research in speech communication.

Graduate school may be viewed as both the beginning and the end. It is quite obviously the end of a long undergraduate path that is filled with many pleasant memories, painstakingly difficult required courses, exciting electives, good and not-so-good professors, times of high pressure and extreme boredom. It is also the beginning of a road for the elite. Before gaining entrance, G.R.E.'s, Miller analogies and verbal aptitude tests must be taken. VITA sheets must be sent and when possible, interviews are highly recommended.

The difficulty with entrance into this society at the graduate level is that it requires the maintenance of distant-ness. As a student one is involved with individual study, isolated papers, long hours of solitude in the library. Frequently, one might side with Hazlitt who said, "It is better to be able neither to read nor write than be able to do nothing else."[1]

Your social life is limited as you begin to focus on your area of interest professionally. Most anticipate the work load but few find the adjustment easy. Huxley said that "Perhaps the most valuable result of all education is the ability to make yourself do the thing you have to do, when it ought to be done, whether you like it or not; it is the first lesson that ought to be learned; and however early a man's training begins, it is probably the last lesson that he learns thoroughly."[2]

Berquist mentions that the main criteria for choosing a doctoral program are "prominence of staff members in your chosen field, financial assistance offered by the university, recommendations of prior instructors, geographic proximity of university to your home, quality of instructional staff in specialized area, personal contact with staff members at conventions, opportunity for exposure to new professors and new ideas, degree-granting institution of your major professor, opportunity to combine master's and doctoral requirements at the same institution, family financial support in university area, doctoral study not offered in your area of interest at master's institution, laboratory resources, number of doctorates granted in this particular department, ability to do entire doctoral program in summers without taking leave of absence."[3] Many of the same ideas pass through the minds of those entering graduate school on the M.A. level. A total of 15 criteria can make the mind boggle, let alone cause a virtiginous effect on the student as he tries desperately to juggle them and maintain a degree of homeostasis!

In addition to why the graduate student does choose a particular place for study there are other areas that he feels should be the criteria by which his choice should have been judged, should have been chosen. Initially, he is in a constant state of conflict often asking himself, "Did I do the right thing?", "Should I have gone elsewhere?"

Thus far the comments have revolved around a

graduate program in general. What is unique or at least characteristic to the field of speech communication? As the name implies, a broader or a narrower view may be taken. In point, this accounts for the divergence of programs offered by various universities. Quite a few schools have undergraduate programs that are well entrenched in the disciplines centered around rhetoric and public address. Some also have a beginning course that may emphasize interpersonal. Others try to incorporate some extracurricular activities such as debate and oral interpretation. Yet, others have actual programs in individual events and debate. Hopefully, these programs, started in undergraduate school, would have their logical continuation and completion within graduate school. Here is where the problem develops. Plato said, "The direction in which education starts a man will determine his future life."[4] However, it is ironic that the education that once sparked an interest might be by necessity the same interest area that smolders it. The scope of courses offered within a graduate program is highly selective and narrows to the point of possible suffocation of many interest areas once developed but no longer pertinent in graduate school that are still for all logical purposes, part of the field of speech. Hence, the student, though well informed on the various courses offered by his school, may find himself entering graduate school with little background in this new emphasis area.

Like other disciplines we are asked to assess our value, structure and our scope. Mortensen echoes Muzafer Sherif in saying that small group work is "disjointed and incoherent."[5] Carpenter and McLuhan tell us that "without an understanding of media grammars, we cannot hope to achieve a contemporary awareness of the world in which we live."[6] They tell us that the aim of education as well as that of their anthology is "to develop an awareness about print and the newer technologies of communication so that we can orchestrate them, minimize their mutual

frustrations and clashes, and get the best out of each in the educational processes."[7] Eisenberg and Smith inform us that "until recent years, the study of communication has been marked by a disparity between formal and experiential knowledge."[8] Professors Eisenberg and Smith tell us to include the nonverbal as well as the verbal in our analysis. And so the line is extended as the names become fused while the message becomes clearer. Professor A tells us to take a look at persuasion. Professor B chides us that rhetorical analysis is the forerunner for both depth and scope within the field. Professor C evaluates the literature available on any topic and finds the field less than fertile. When the pros publicize their confusion and skepticism about the present state of the field what can you expect from someone just entering its realm? Isn't this attitude bound to be reflected and internalized by the graduate student?

Another problem that plagues the graduate student is the real world outside. Will it be ready for him when he is ready for it? What are the possibilities for job opportunities? In an age when many departments are asked to consistently justify their programs in terms of money output, positions are on the decrease and certain fields seem very much on the wane. Disenheartened and disenchanted, many graduate students opt for continuing education in other fields -- political science, sociology, psychology and with great frequency -- law.

However, some of us still plug along, doing what we hope we do best, actively seeking answers to questions that keep us motivated, keep us finely tuned so that we can knock off papers at high speed and still have a degree of polish to them. What gives meaning to this program? Essentially that the field of speech communication <u>is</u> broad, <u>is</u> flexible, allows for diversity, expects creativity and demands a sense of responsibility. This routine is not so regimented that you cannot feel free to respond with your own individuality to certain situations.

Also, since the times you socialize are few, I feel that the people you associate with are a valuable part of your program. As an M.A. candidate I was part of a smaller program whereby the people found time for me. Consequently, I spent hours learning in an informal style -- from comments in regards to previous classes or responses to articles or hallway discussions. There are two keynotes of the faculty at the university I attended: willingness and accessibility. I understand however, that this is not the case in much larger programs. For those of you who are not in the position of being part of a smaller group, I would try to make the most of whatever assistantship you were given, if any. If that doesn't work delve into your course material. If you still feel stale after serious introspection and a talk or two to a professional advisor, I would suggest perhaps another endeavor that would be more palatable to your tastes. But the cold hard fact of graduate school is that it is a game. You need to know the rules and be willing to play. Often meaning must come from yourself.

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FOOTNOTES

[1] William Hazlitt, On the Ignorance of the Learned.

[2] Thomas Henry Huxley, Technical Education (1877).

[3] Goodwin F. Berquist, Jr., "Some Reflections on Choosing a Department for Doctoral Study," Quarterly Journal of Speech, (April, 1964), 209.

[4] Plato, The Republic, Book IV, 425-B.

[5] C. David Mortensen, "The Status of Small Group Research," Quarterly Journal of Speech, LVI (October, 1970), 304.

[6] Edmund Carpenter and Marshall McLuhan, eds., Explorations in Communication (Boston: Bacon Press, 1967), xii.

[7] Abne M. Eisenberg and Ralph R. Smith, Jr., Nonverbal Communication (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1971), 3-4.

[8] Ibid.